

THE NATURE OF THINGS

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The Nature of Things is a collection of stories and a
preface that examine character motivation. The author is
concerned with unexpected reactions and surprising outcomes.
The stories are independent of each other and involve a wide
range of characters.

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PREFACE

On my mother's side of the family, the women are all artists. While the mediums differ, the purpose is the same: to express the way life looks to the artist. My grandmother paints landscapes in oil the way they look to her, my mother paints a room or a piece of furniture to reflect beauty in an object, my sister captures moments she notices on film, and I describe with words the way I see the world.

I loved to read growing up. I lay on the couch all day with a book, not noticing the sky darkening as one character or another played out their role in the author's imagined situation. I was much like Patricia Hampl: "And I was a literary kid from the get-go, falling into fairy tales, and, later, enormous nineteenth-century novels as if into vats of imported heavy cream where I was perfectly content to drown" (24-5).

I never seriously considered creating situations and characters myself until late into my undergraduate studies. It seemed so easy at first. Just create a character, put him or her in some unusual circumstances, or out them in

normal circumstances and have them do something unusual. If Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Raymond Carver could do it, so could I. My disillusionment began as soon as the actual work did. After several false starts and a wastebasket full of crinkled-up papers, I decided I did not have anything valid to write about. I had several interests, but nothing to say.

I looked for inspiration in a book by various female authors about their work called The Writer on her Work volume II: New Essays in New Territory. It was here that I found the essay, "The Need to Say It", in which Patricia Hampl suggests that a writer should write about what matters, which might be the same thing as what one knows. "Put another way: how did I come to believe that what I knew was also what mattered? And more to the point for the future, is it what matters?" (25).

Even successful writers have doubts about the validity of their own subject matter, and in the end, the things they knew were the same things that mattered, that is, to them. That simplification helped me to get started writing. Once I stopped trying to think of what would please my thesis committee, the ideas came more easily and I could sit down for long periods of time and write. However, I did

not write exclusively about what I know. I wrote much more about what I could imagine.

In his instructional book, The Art of Fiction, John Gardner seems to agree with my method. "Nothing can be more limiting to the imagination, nothing is quicker to turn on the psyche's censoring devices and distortion systems, than the trying to write truthfully and interestingly about one's own home town, one's Episcopal mother, one's crippled sister" (18). Being personally involved tends to blur certain truths. Take for example a woman who is desperately in love with a man, and therefore refuses to see his faults, even if they are blatant. Children seldom see their parents' humanity. Censorship and embellishment are practically automatic, consciously in writing or subconsciously before any words even hit the page, when the subject matter is too close to the writer. The urge to protect or glorify tends to disappear when the writer is further from the situation and characters. He or she can make unbiased decisions about them to create a story that works.

The writer assumes a daunting task when creating a story. His or her ideas must be engaging to several groups of people in order to be successful. While a little

distance can be positive, a writer's concerns must be present in his/her writing to make the material interesting. This makes choosing one's subject matter a delicate balance between distance and genuine interest. F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, "You do not write to say something. You write because you have something to say." A writer must have at least enough concern about the subject matter to have an opinion about it. Charles Dickens' tales would not have been half as entertaining if he had not had some commentary to make about the Victorian society in which he lived and which he despised.

When Dickens' imagination went to work in the Victorian society which he dominated and detested, it produced a picture which was certainly caricatured and unfair in particulars, but which in general now seems not only to reflect his own times accurately but also to be a disturbingly close likeness of our own (Calder 11).

He maintained a safe distance from his personal life, while still writing about what he knew and, to some extent, cared about.

There are certain terrible and wonderful things that I have experienced, read about, learned about, or heard about that evoked emotion in me. In order to make my own writing interesting; I chose some of these injustices and triumphs of life to write about, even though I had not personally experienced them. And what I know, small bits of my personal life and understanding, slipped into each story. Janet Burroway confirms the source and the fitness of my subject matter in her encouraging instruction to writers. "You share with most-and the best-twentieth-century fiction writers a sense of the injustice, the absurdity and the beauty of the world; and you want to register your protest, your laughter and your affirmation" (29).

One particular interest of mine is influence. I love to understand why people do the things they do. Character motivation was the thesis of many papers I wrote for classes. On several occasions, I imagined a scene in which a character does something unusual. Then, I built the story around that scene and discovered what influences on that character made them act in the way they did. This is my favorite way to write. In my stories, I examine how situations, setting, other characters, inner conflicts and a ten-dollar bill influence my characters.

I varied my characters as much as I varied the influences on them because the very nature of a person affects how s/he is influenced. I chose characters that are more complex than they would seem at a glance, even if the fictional encounter with them is brief. There is the sweet old lady who, for the sake of her garden, performs ghastly tasks, the homeless man who is a benefit to society in his own way, and the older gentleman who lives in a retirement community and commits robberies. Janet Burroway describes the way interesting characters exhibit conflict and contradiction, what "Aristotle called 'consistent inconsistencies'"(104).

A balance must also be struck between individuality and universality. While each difference can be celebrated, it is wonderful to read something and think to yourself, "I felt exactly that way!" Natalia Ginzburg expressed what I discovered about becoming a mother and I felt an immediate connection to her. She put my thoughts into words in a manner both familiar and unconventional. "Now I no longer wanted to write like a man, because I had had children and I thought I knew a great many things about tomato sauce and even if I didn't put them into my story it helped my vocation. I seemed to me that women knew things about their

children that a man could never know" (114). We all gain the same understanding as we experience certain things, yet we all still remain individuals, capable only of our own, real reactions. This contradiction made my life extremely difficult. How can a writer relate to several different readers and still be true to his/her ideas and characters? "But unfortunately, the capacity for universality, like talent, is a trick of the genes or a miracle of the soul, and if you aim for the universal, you're likely to achieve the pompous, whereas, if you aim for the individual, you're likely to achieve the typical, and the universe can't be forced" (Burroway 101).

One writer who seems to have conquered both the individual and the universal is Shakespeare. He wrote plays over four hundred years ago that still profoundly affect audiences in an age he probably never could have imagined. This above all: to thine own self be true, / And it must follow, as the night the day, / Thou canst not then be false to any man" (Shakespeare 2028). Polonius' advice could be applied to writing. Listen to what your soul is telling you, and your writing will seem sincere and perhaps even interesting to someone else. The problem lays in the

introspection required to be true to one's self. This presented difficulties to Sherwood Anderson, who found:

More absurdity in myself, endless absurdities. My own childishness sometimes amused me. Would it amuse others? Were others like myself, hopelessly childish? Many men and women seemed, in outward appearance at least, to comport themselves in life with a certain dignity. All history was filled with the stories of men who had managed to get through life with at least an outward dignity. Was all history a lie? (233)

To my mind, history itself is not a lie; however, the nostalgia for certain eras can alter the way the past is fathomed by later generations. Witness the popular sitcoms set in the nineteen fifties. If a person were to establish knowledge about this epoch based on those shows, s/he would think everything was perfect until the social revolutions of the late sixties. Further study, or even reading a few beatnik classics, would eradicate that false impression.

I believe there was a certain naivete during the fifties and early sixties that no longer exists. That is why I set my coming of age story in the fifties. I compare

the loss of a society's innocence to the loss of an individual's innocence. In both cases, enlightenment is wonderful, terrible, exciting, disturbing and necessary. I explored these contradictions in "It's Not All Roses in the Fourth Grade."

While mistrust of the government began to grow through McCarthyism, a young boy is discovering that the authority over him is not as faultless as he had perceived. He realizes his parents are merely human, and that the world is not always fair. He is equipped with intelligence, a playful attitude and a burgeoning sexuality that provides distraction in a time of terror. While he huddles under his desk, waiting for a hydrogen bomb to explode, he finds his thoughts wandering to other things, such as the roses on a classmate's underwear.

I found inspiration in a similar story by Sherwood Anderson. In "I Want to Know Why," an adolescent discovers an ugly truth, that his role model can deeply appreciate a horse in just the same way the protagonist does, and the very same day do something considered distasteful to the boy. I believe the relationship between my protagonist and his teacher parallels this one, but the fallout from my protagonist's discovery is much more damaging.

"The Small Details" stems from a desire I have to know myself and act accordingly. My protagonist travels to her childhood home to care for her father. There, through a bit of exploration, she gets to know her dead mother, and she learns about herself, what she wants, and what she no longer needs. I have always felt that a journey to one's childhood home as an adult helps put all things in perspective, at least, for a while. Everyone grows up and leaves home, and a few people forget the way they really are in their efforts to get ahead and be accepted. "To thine own self be true" (Shakespeare 2028). My character discovers herself in stories by her mother.

One discovery I have made about my life is the true nature of my relationship with my mother. The mother/daughter relationship, while sometimes fraught with conflict, can be one of the most rewarding relationships women have with each other. I find the relationship interesting because of the contradictions it offers. My own mother has been a source of much love, sympathy, comfort, and frustration for me. Many women find that, despite all their intentions set in their teenage years, they are much like their own mothers. I believe a mother's influence can reach beyond the grave, and in my story, it does.

"Ten Dollars" is an examination of money and character, as well as how brief encounters affect people. In it, a bill floats around town, encountering various people as it does. The circumstances that each person gains and loses the bill gives character revelation in a very brief period of time. There are no central characters so that each one could be assessed without the bias of a third person-limited narrator. I was inspired to write this by thinking about the brief encounters that we all share. I find it interesting how much power people have to influence each other, even if the encounter only lasts thirty seconds. On some days, the kindness a stranger can show in a few seconds can alter someone's mood. Instead of describing random meetings, I made money the central influence, because what humans do for and with money can speak volumes about that person.

"Mrs. Cleome's Wondrous Soil" is an indulgence in a form of tale I particularly enjoy: dark humor with a surprise ending. This was inspired by another favorite author of mine, Roald Dahl. While his children's tales are wonderful and sweet, his adult stories are a delight to anyone that enjoys being surprised with an ending that is not happily ever after. The story also takes a brief look

at how life feeds on itself. As one form is broken down, another flourishes. Perhaps the ending is not so terrible if the reader considers it from a biologist's point of view. Life for some things has to end so that life for others can continue.

The final story is influenced by Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants". I was intrigued that a story, which consists of mostly dialogue, reveals its plot in what is left unspoken. This deconstructive technique appealed to me. I tried to use the same tools, implied speech, actions and setting, to indicate what my characters were really thinking in "We Shouldn't Have Come Here."

While these stories are so different, they are all a small reflection of me. From the time of being read to in my childhood to reading for my daughter, I have found inspiration to write them. They have grown in me from images and words, fleshed out by my own experience and reading over twenty years, and yet I wonder how they would change if I wrote them again in forty.

IT'S NOT ALL ROSES IN THE FOURTH GRADE

The alarm sounded at three o'clock in the afternoon. The loud wailing screamed from the new tower in Town Square like a fire engine. We could hear it just fine, five blocks away from the windows of our fourth grade classroom. The noise went through the windows and into our afternoon daydreams. I was saving Eisenhower from a trap set by the red Chinese when Mr. Jackson, whom I liked to believe was related to Shoeless Joe, took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"Okay, boys and girls, get on the floor under your desks, just like the drill."

We scattered papers and books, scrambling to get under our desks to avoid being burned up like those Japanese kids in World War II. I knelt under my desk and watched the red second hand of the clock over the bulletin board tick slowly around the face. The board's green border Mr. Jackson had stapled up last month was falling down from the top corner, covering half the picture of Saturn, our planet of the month. We all crouched under our small metal desks, looking around at each other with wide eyes. We were

holding the tops of our knees, with our butts pressed hard against the cold white floor. I wondered if Mom was in the backyard shelter that Dad built last summer. I hoped she was; even though she probably ignored this drill, as she ignored all the others. Then, I remembered to count. *One- one thousand, two-one thousand...*

"Hey, Steve." Cory Jacob's voice interrupted my counting.

"Hey, what?" I saw him through the legs of his plastic chair. Cory had a cowlick on the side of his head that bounced when he moved. He held his legs crossed in front on him, and I noticed all the scratches and bruises that must have happened last weekend, when Cory jumped out of the treehouse in his backyard. His mom got really mad and told us that we could easily break a leg doing things like that. Cory pointed over to my left, and when I looked over there, I saw that the back of Mary McCallahan's dress was spread out over the floor. We could see all the way from her shiny black shoe buckles to her scraped knees (I wondered if she had a treehouse too) to her lacy white underpants. I noticed red roses sewn above the lace going around her legs and I couldn't help but stare. I knew I shouldn't be looking, especially while the entire country

might have been under attack by the Communists, but at that moment it wouldn't have mattered if the president came in the room. I couldn't keep my eyes from the rosebuds on Mary's underwear that disappeared into the shadows of her open dress.

The siren kept on going, and I kept on staring.

"Keep your heads down, children."

"If it goes past ten-one thousand, then it's the real thing," Cory said, his eyes still glued on Mary's miniature rose garden.

"Nine-one thou..." someone said. And then we all sat in silence.

"Please get back into your chairs." Mr. Jackson got up, straightened his glasses, and brushed off his wrinkled brown pants. He picked up the chalk and continued to explain the way Saturn rotated around the sun. I looked at the thinning web of hair that covered the bald spot on the back of his head and thought about Mary's roses for the rest of the day.

Cory and I walked home together when the weather was good; it stayed so warm in Southern California that we walked almost every day. We didn't mind; it gave us a

chance to stop by the stream that ran through town. There, we would sit on the bank, throw rocks, and talk about important stuff, like who was going to win the World Series and whether Mr. Jackson was going to coach for Little League again. We would try to guess what happened to that woman who used to gurgle like a baby on that radio show, and disappeared mysteriously last year.

Cory's house was closer than mine was, so I would stop there for a little bit before going home. Dad told me his house was built to withstand an earthquake. It looked like a spaceship from one of those movies. It had arches that came off the roof, sloped over part of the front lawn, and buried themselves deep in the grass. I waited for the day when Cory would tell me that he and his family were returning to their home planet. He would pull off his human mask and become a bug-eyed thing with large antennae sticking out of his head. Then he would give me his collection of autographed baseballs, and walk into the house. The arches would uproot from the yard and the house would shudder until smoke bellowed out and it zoomed away.

Cory's house was not the only thing that made me think this. His family was really weird. His mom would make up new food, which Cory would complain about every day at

school. They ate things like turtle soup and goat cheese. Other causes for suspicion, besides the fact that Cory was really good at math and science, were his sister and brother. His sister had three braids, one on each side of her head and a third in the back. It was like she tried to be normal, but was a little bit off. His brother liked to pop us in the head with his finger. I figured this kind of torture could only have been invented on another planet, where fingers are much longer, so that you could use this technique for distracting someone with a ray gun. Of course, I'm not sure about this. I only have my guesses.

It was probably more likely that he and his family were Commie spies. I hoped they weren't because I liked Cory, and some guy named Tail-Gunner Joe was catching all the communists in the country. I figured it wouldn't be long before he caught them too. Then, they would have to be in court with Senator McCarthy. From what Dad told me, no one wanted to be in that situation.

On the way home, we talked about who had a chance of beating the Yanks. They seemed to be undefeatable. Cory said that the Dodgers would beat them, because they won the World Series last year, but I told him I was sure the Yanks

would beat the Dodgers this year. I didn't want a possible communist spy to think that I wanted any team but the original New York Yankees to win the big baseball game.

We also talked about Mary's roses.

"I think she wanted us to see them."

"You mean she knew we could?"

"Yeah. Why bother having flowers on your underwear if you're not going to show them off?"

He had a point, and I told him he might be right, that I never thought about it that way. My underwear were plain white, and I didn't want Mary to see them.

When we got back to his house, his mother was waving at us. She had a plate of something, but I didn't want to know what it was. Mom had told me that she was going to be playing cards with Mrs. Walters and Mrs. Grady today. She said I should stay over at Cory's until five, but I figured it would be okay if I just went home. I could let myself in and be really quiet so I didn't disturb their game.

"I have to get home," I lied. "Mom wanted me home right away today." I walked down the block to our house. It was pretty warm for February, and I was getting hot, so I stopped took off my sweater, tied it around my waist, and

looked down the street towards my house. That was when I noticed that Mr. Jackson's car was parked outside my house.

I started wondering if I had done anything wrong, but it wasn't like Mr. Jackson to be a snitch. He would let us fool around a little more than we should. Sometimes, he even kept recess going a little bit after the bell rang.

Maybe he saw me looking at Mary's underwear.

If he saw me and came to my house, then it must have been really bad. What if he thought I was some kind of weirdo? What if he told Mary's parents? I didn't want to walk in and see the look my mom would have on her face when she found out where I had been looking during our drill. She would probably tell Dad, and I was in for it then.

I gave up all hope that Mr. Jackson was at my house for any other reason, and decided to sneak in the back way. I walked around the side of the house, keeping close to the fence and low to the ground, and ducked under the living room window. I pretended to be an Army guy about to catch the enemy unaware. I walked really carefully so that I wouldn't make any noise and made it past my room and around to the back of the house. I could hear muffled voices coming from inside, but not what they were saying. The voices were clearer on the other side of the house. There

was an old milkbox below one of the kitchen windows. I stepped on it, put my fingers on the windowsill, and stood on my toes to look inside.

Through the window I could see the kitchen and part of the dining room. My mom was standing next to the sink, filling a vase with water. Mr. Jackson was standing next to the kitchen table, unwrapping some red roses in green paper. He pulled at something that kept the paper together so hard that it ripped open and the roses fell out on the table. Mom turned around and laughed.

What was going on? Was it Mom's birthday? Why was Mr. Jackson helping her unwrap roses? Neither one of them looked mad. I forgot about Mary, and tried to figure out why Mr. Jackson was at my house. My fingers were starting to hurt from the bricks. I watched as Mr. Jackson went over to my mom and hugged her. Then, she kissed him on the lips. They were leaning up against the table kissing. Mr. Jackson's hands were rubbing Mom's back. My fingers finally slipped, and I fell backwards on the grass. I rubbed the red dust off them, and felt my eyes getting hot. I sat there for a long time not able to figure out why Mom would kiss Mr. Jackson the way she kissed Dad.

After a while, I saw Mr. Jackson get in his car and drive off. I waited, then went inside the front door. Mom was in the kitchen. She was cutting up carrots for dinner, just like nothing happened. I stood in the door and stared at her back. She turned around and dropped her knife when she saw me. Then, she smiled at me.

"Hi, Honey. You startled me. I didn't know you were home."

"Who gave you those, Mom?"

"Oh, Granny sent them. Wasn't that sweet?"

"Yeah. Well, I've got homework. I'll be in my room."

I went to my room, and flopped on the bed. Maybe they were really good friends. Maybe Granny really did send them, and Mr. Jackson just stopped by to tell Mom how much better I was doing in math. After all, my mom wouldn't lie to me.

I decided not to say anything to Dad when he got home. I didn't say anything at all during dinner. Mom asked me if I was okay, and I told her I was fine so she wouldn't come near me to take my temperature. I couldn't even look at her. The roses sat in the center of the table, and Dad didn't suspect anything after Mom told him her mother sent them. I stared at the front of Mom's dress, and wondered

if Mr. Jackson saw under it. I wondered if he saw as much of her as I did of Mary. I went back in my room after dinner. Later, I heard my dad come to say goodnight. He stood in my doorway leaning against the frame and looked in

"Hey, Steve. What's up?"

"Nothing." I said, staring at the floor.

"Did you do okay in school today?"

"Yeah."

"Are you getting along okay with Cory?"

"Yeah." I noticed my Lone Ranger figure was kinda dusty. I went over and picked it up and brought it back with me to the bed.

"Why are you so quiet? Your mother is worried about you."

"Yeah, I'm sure she is." I threw Lone Ranger and hit my bookshelf and landed upside down with Silver's hooves pointed toward the ceiling. Dad was looking at Silver too.

"What do you mean, son?"

"Nothing."

"Is there something you want to tell me?" He came into the room and sat down next to me on the bed. I stared at the red stripes on my sheets. I wondered if Dad had any idea about Mom. He was at the hospital a lot. Sometimes

he even stayed there till really late at night. I guess he didn't see much of Mom. I looked up at him, and noticed his bright blue eyes had streaks of gray in them. I did not say anything, but I hugged him, which I never did anymore. It felt good to hug Dad. For a minute, it made everything all right. I felt like I was going to cry, but I bit the insides of my cheeks so that I wouldn't.

Finally, Dad got up and said that he'll be in the living room for a little while if I wanted to talk about it. I didn't leave my room that night.

I could tell there was something wrong as soon as I walked into the classroom the next morning. I looked at Cory, and he just shrugged at me, so I looked at Mary. She was wearing a light blue dress, little lacy blue socks, and Keds. She wore ribbons in her brown hair to match her dress. Did her underwear match too? The blue in her dress made her eyes look pretty, and I thought about my dad. Am I going to tell him what I saw yesterday? Mr. Jackson was late. He was never late. I checked my watch to be sure, and the long hand was way past the twelve. We were all waiting there in silence for him for about two minutes.

"Where is Mr. Jackson?" Someone said, and the whole class started murmuring and guessing. Andy Finneman said that he must have been abducted by the Chinese, and Nancy Hollingsworth said that he joined the CIA. We all had to believe Nancy, because her dad works for the government, and we didn't know for sure, but we figured he was in Intelligence. We all wondered who would be our teacher now that Mr. Jackson was Agent Jackson, CIA, when he walked in.

My stomach did a few flip-flops. I looked at him and thought about how he always put together the best classroom projects, how he coached the Little League team every year, how he gave out the best prizes for classroom games. Then I thought about the way he was with my mom. I thought about his hands on her back. I couldn't believe that was the same person.

"Please be quiet, so that we may begin." He started with the Pledge of Allegiance, and we all stood up and said it with him. I was wondering why the country was invisible, looking at Mr. Jackson, when I noticed his voice crack a little, especially when we got to *with liberty and justice for all*. He had his hand over his heart, the same hand that was rubbing my mom's back, and I noticed it

shaking a little bit. Finally, it was over, and we could all sit down.

"Linda Allister." I didn't notice anything about his voice now; maybe I was imagining it before. It took a little longer for Mr. Jackson to call roll because he kept rubbing his nose and looking out the window. He must have had hay fever. Mom gets it every spring. I wondered if you could catch hay fever from kissing. If you could, he definitely deserved it. The class spent that day learning geography, science and math. I spent it staring out the window, wishing I were anywhere but there.

At lunch the conversation was dominated by science projects. I stared down at my peanut butter and jelly sandwich, with the grape jelly oozing out over the crusts. Every so often, I looked over at Mr. Jackson, who seemed preoccupied with something. I hoped he wasn't thinking about my mom. He missed Phil Skruzecut throw a bean at Tyler Andrews.

After lunch, around two o'clock, a man came into our classroom to talk about how we can all do our part to spot and report communist spies. The man wore a dark blue suit with very thin stripes, and looked more like an adult than Mr. Jackson in his short-sleeved white shirt and wrinkled

blue pants. The man told us to be sure to report anyone who tried to persuade us to be communist spies. Mr. Jackson looked tired through the whole presentation. He sat at his desk and shuffled papers. The man finished, but before he left he looked hard at Mr. Jackson. He pulled a small card out of his pocket, and put it on Mr. Jackson's desk.

"I hope you will call me if you have something to share," he told Mr. Jackson. Then, he turned to us and said, "I hope you have all learned something today."

He left the room, and Mr. Jackson surprised us by not discussing the guest's speech like he usually did. Instead, he started right in on the planets.

On the way home, Cory and I talked about going to Venus and Mary's underwear. I forgot to ask him if he noticed something weird at school today. I guessed he didn't, or he would have said something. I didn't want to go home, so I stayed at his house to eat bagels and lox, which really weren't bad, if you used enough cream cheese.

After a little while, Mrs. Jacobs suggested that it was time for me to go home.

The next day Mr. Jackson was gone. There was another teacher there who told us that she would be taking over for a while. She didn't mention Mr. Jackson. We weren't asked if we had questions. I was glad not to see Mr. Jackson again.

A week later, when I got home, my mother called me into the kitchen. She made a plateful of chocolate chip cookies. They were sitting on the kitchen table. I picked one up, and felt the gooey melted chocolate on my fingers. It was still hot, so I had to put it down and lick my fingers.

"Stevie, you've been acting a little strange, and I want to know if you're okay."

"I'm okay."

She ruffled my hair. "You know, sometimes we all make mistakes, and we feel bad after we make them, but we can't change what we did."

I started to choke on the chocolate in my mouth.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

"Well, you know I'm not perfect, but you know I do love you and Dad. Don't you?"

"Yeah." I did not want to be talking about this. Not now, not ever. "Mom, Cory and I have to work on this science project, over at his house. And so, I have to go."

"Okay, honey. You know, if you need to talk I'm here. A lot of the time we need to talk about something that happened to us, or something that we saw, and when we talk about it, we feel a lot better. Sometimes the thing that's bothering us is really nothing at all."

"Okay, Mom. Can I go now?"

"Sure, Hon."

I got my things together, and was just about to leave for Cory's, when I heard something drop in the kitchen. Then, I heard my Mom say "Oh, Oh my God!"

I ran into the kitchen to see if Mom was okay. She was standing in the kitchen, staring at the television. The cookie sheet was on the floor by her feet, and the floor was covered with cookies. She turned towards me when she heard the door swing open. Her mouth was open, and it snapped shut when she looked at me.

"Mom, are you okay?"

"Oh, honey, I'm fine. I just burnt my hand." She still had the hot pad on her hand, and I knew she was lying. I looked over to the TV and saw a man standing

behind a table. He was talking, but I couldn't hear what he said because the volume was all the way down. It took me a while before I realized that it was Mr. Jackson. I looked at Mom, who was picking cookies off the floor. She had a small tear running down one of her cheeks. She wiped it away and kept picking up cookies. She didn't look at me.

I ran over to Cory's house. My backpack was full of supplies, which kept hitting me in the back. When I got there, his sister let me in. I followed her down the hall, watching her third pigtail swing behind her. Cory's family was in the living room. His dad must have gotten home early. He already had his slippers on, and was smoking a pipe. But then again, it was six o'clock. I guessed most normal dads were home by then.

They were all watching the news report on Mr. Jackson. Apparently, he was a Communist spy, and was captured by authorities last week. I couldn't believe it, and neither could anyone else. Mr. Jackson was the guy everyone wanted to be. He was the best schoolteacher and the Little League coach. He was even on the city council, and he never missed a PTA Meeting. But I did see him with my mom.

I left Cory's house with a million questions on my mind. When I got home, I heard my parents talking in the backyard. I went to their room, and lay on their bed. I saw their outlines as shadows on the back porch.

"You shouldn't smoke, honey. They linked cancer to cigarettes last year." My dad's voice was low and soft. It sounded a lot like Mr. Jackson's.

"Yeah, and they'll find out next year that it's not true. You know those studies first hand."

Dad didn't press it. "I don't want to argue with you tonight. I just want to enjoy my early night off. Okay?"

"Early? You got home at eight. I'm really tired of your schedule, Tim."

"It puts food on the table, and gives you a lot of things other people can't afford. You knew what you were getting into when you married a doctor."

"Like I had a choice!"

"That's enough, Kate. I don't want Steve to hear you."

I went to my room after that. I tried to be really quiet so they wouldn't hear me. I got in bed and pretended to be asleep when my dad came in to check on me.

On Saturday, Mom went shopping and left Dad and me at home alone. We were in the living room, where I was drawing pictures of boats in my notebook, and Dad was reading the paper. I wanted to ask him about Mr. Jackson, but the thought of talking about my teacher with Dad made my stomach hurt. I was about to ask him why he had to work so much when he cleared his throat and started talking to me first.

"Steve, I'm going away for a while."

"Are you going on vacation? Can I go with you?"

"No, Steve. Your mom and I have decided that we aren't going to live together for a while. You are going to stay here with her and I am going to live somewhere else. But I promise I won't be far, and you can come and see me anytime you want, as long as you don't miss school."

"But I want to go with you. Why can't I go with you?"

"We decided you should be with your mom, Steve." His voice was so calm and so sad. I only knew I had started to cry when I felt a tear run down my face. I wiped it away as quickly as I could. If Dad didn't think I could act like a man, then he wouldn't want me to live with him.

"Please don't go."

"I have to, son. It's really for the best, you'll see."

"I don't want to see. I want to go with you. Why can't I go with you Dad?"

"Look, Steve. I'm already packed. I'm leaving today, as soon as your mom gets home. You need to stay here and be with her." I insisted that I didn't want to be with her, but I couldn't tell him why. I could never tell him what I saw. When he left, I cried so hard I thought I was going to burst. I ran up to my room and didn't come out until Mom called me for supper.

We sat at the table, staring at the cold mashed potatoes and corn on our plates. There was no steak. Dad usually grills the steak, so I guess Mom just skipped that part. I wasn't hungry anyway. I just wanted to go back upstairs.

"Steve. There is something you should know."

I held my breath, waiting for her to tell me what was happening with her and my teacher. I didn't want to hear it, but I wanted her to be able to explain what I had seen. IT had to make sense somehow, or this was all her fault. Dad going away was all her fault.

"Your teacher, Mr. Jackson. Well, he was wrongly accused of something he didn't do. See, lots of people are going around calling people communist spies, and he's not one, but someone called him that."

"How do you know? What makes you so smart?"

"Well, honey, all the adults are getting together to support him. We all believe he is innocent."

"All the adults, or just you, Mom? Why do you care so much?" I got up and ran back upstairs. Mom didn't call me down again.

A few days later, I was back in school. Mrs. Andrews was there. She took roll, then the lessons began. I had never been so bored, or felt so lonely and confused as I did then. It was hot in the classroom. Mrs. Andrews wouldn't open the windows, so we all had to sit there and sweat. She was at the chalkboard. She didn't teach math the way Mr. Jackson did, with games and contests. She just did problems and assigned homework. I started doodling in my book. I was drawing an ever-widening circle that started from a dot and went over numbers and problems. I planned on taking it out, over the book and onto the desk. I thought about drawing it in ink. Maybe I would make it bigger and bigger till it covered the whole room. A paper

airplane flew over my head and landed at Mrs. Andrews' feet. There were a few giggles behind me. She stepped backwards, squashing the paper plane. She kept on explaining math. I was getting hotter. I took off my sweater, and dropped it next to me. I looked over at Mary. She was playing with a strand of her hair, twisting it with her thumb and first finger. I went back to my circle, which was now over two thirds of the book. My pencil dipped each time I would draw over the crack between the two pages. Another plane flew by me. Mrs. Andrews turned around.

"Steven Davis. Why are you drawing in your text?"

I didn't answer her; I just kept widening my circle. She came over to me and asked me again. I dropped the pencil and stood up. I wasn't thinking about anything now, except how unfair she had been, picking me out over everyone else. Mr. Jackson never did that.

"I'm bored," I said.

She didn't answer me. Instead, she took my pencil, turned around, and walked towards the front of the room.

"I want to go home!" I said, this time louder than before.

Everyone was staring at me. I looked at Mary, who was beginning to smile, and I thought she looked a little bit like Marilyn Monroe, except with brown hair.

"Sit down, Steven."

"No!"

Was I standing up? Where was this coming from? I had never been bad in class. It felt good to say no to a grown up, but I couldn't stop there. I felt like my body was out of control. I felt myself walking towards the door, then I felt myself stop. I slowly walked back towards Mary's desk. She was staring at me. Her mouth was open in a little o.

"I'm bored too." said Cory. He blushed purple, and looked at his desk.

"Me too," said another voice. I looked back and saw Mary standing.

"Children, please."

Mrs. Andrews straightened up, and left the classroom. Everyone sat in silence, except me and Mary. I went and stood right in front of her. She just looked at me. I reached over, grabbed her shoulders, pulled her closer, and kissed her, just like Mr. Jackson kissed my mom. She

didn't really kiss me back, but she didn't push me away
either.

THE SMALL DETAILS

Carol's father was young to suffer such a bodily insult, but as Carol reminded him, "Your diet precludes your good health, Dad." She came back to Virginia, her daughter Sara in tow, to her father's house.

From the outside, the house seemed not to have changed at all. The Boston ivy still covered the brick sides of the old Tudor, growing around the windows and, now she realized what a hazard it was, pulling the mortar out from between the dark gray bricks. The windows were crossed several times with lead and opened outward, although none of them were open now. The front door was a very solid oak, stained a dark honey color and opened to a large house that was cozy because the rooms were full of comforts and memories.

Sara ran down the hall with her small suitcase bumping against her leg with each step.

"Mama, where do I go?"

Carol caught up with her and took her to a guestroom on the second floor. Then she took her suitcase up to her old room and dropped it rather heavily on the bed that had

been hers as long as she could remember. She put some dresses in the closet, then went down to the kitchen to make herself and her father some tea.

She noticed that nothing had changed in the house. It was the same as the day she had gone to her first day of kindergarten, returned from her mother's funeral, and finally left for college. The teapot was in the fifth cabinet to her right, the tea in the drawer beneath the counter there. As the water began to steam, she thought about her mother.

Her mother's auburn hair was usually swept up, and her green eyes used to shine so gently. Carol and her sisters had inherited her angular face, but not her coloring. That went to Carol's brother, Edward, who looked the most like her mother. She was graceful, elegant and soft. Carol remembered most how she would come to their rooms just before they fell asleep and kiss them goodnight. She smelled of lavender and fresh linen. Since that time, Carol had always thought of her when she passed Crabtree & Evelyn or when she had just pressed her linen napkins. The tea was ready and she made her father a tray. She put a few crackers on a plate next to it and carried it up to his bedroom.

Her father had switched sleeping quarters when her mother died. He was now on the second door in the right. Carol knocked softly and opened it. She set the tea tray down on a small table next to the bed and sat in a chair while he started. Her father lifted a cracker up to his mouth with his good left hand then paused. "You look so much like your mother."

After her father finished his tea, and Carol had cleaned up, she went back upstairs and paused outside her mother's study. The room had been locked since she died. Some of Carol's earliest memories involved Mozart seeping out from under her mother's closed study door. There was one piece that usually began the private concert. Carol could almost hear it now. She closed her eyes when she heard the beginning strains of it. The piece reached into her, somehow bypassing her ears and headed straight for her chest, which felt as if someone were pulling at it, wanting something she did not know how to give.

Carol was nine when her mother died. As she grew older, her memories of her mother grew fainter until only one was clear in her mind. Her mother was so still in the coffin. Carol reached out to touch her then pulled her hand

away quickly when she felt how cold her mother's body had become.

For a time after her mother died, the study was locked with all her mother's music and books inaccessible behind a solid oak door. As a young girl, Carol passed the study on her way for a glass of water or trip to the bathroom, after the traffic on the busy street at the bottom of their hill had stopped. She heard the beginning strains of that first piece. Carol's feet would move quickly yet softly over the runner carpet on the hardwood floor to her room, and she would sob into her pillow until the next morning.

Sometime in her teens, the music stopped for Carol. She took the hallway at a slower pace, lay her head on her pillow and thought about the boys at school. A few years later, she left her father's house and her childhood to attend college. So it was, that she got on with her life in an ordinary fashion, her mother's death a memory now, only to be thought about on certain days and occasions. So it was, until the time her father had a stroke.

Now, she stood outside the study door and listened to the piece play in her head. She had learned in college its title, Mozart's Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra in A major. She loved it. Whenever she had a particularly

trying day, she would play it softly and close her eyes. It had the power it always did, to pry into her soul. She put her hand on the doorknob leading into the closed study. The crystal was unnaturally cold, and she let go of it immediately and walked down the hall to her own room.

Days later, while Sara played in the large backyard, Carol was back outside the study, this time with the key. The key had been kept in the drawer of a small cabinet next to the door. It was an old wooden cabinet with a marble top. There was nothing else in the drawer but the key. It was a small brass key that beckoned her each time she opened the drawer to look at it. Now, she put it in the lock and turned it. The lock opened easily with a small click and the door opened, revealing a stale odor mixed with the aroma of bound paper, that had come to represent itself to her as that wonderful library smell. Carol pulled her sweater closer around her.

She thought she would come upon a room full of cobwebs and dust, but someone had been in there cleaning. The books lined the walls in an orderly fashion and, as she read the titles, she noticed they were in chronological order beginning with The Iliad on the first shelf to the left of the door. This was the only room in the house that was so

organized. She gently slid her fingers along the books; some of the bindings were leather and felt soft and dry to her fingers. Before this moment she felt that she had read enough literature to sustain her for the rest of her life. She now noticed short stories by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, and several other books she had never heard of. She decided to read what she could in the time she was here. It was easy for her to make such a resolution, since she had no idea how long she would be here.

Carol thought about how frail her father looked. She might become an orphan sometime soon. She had always thought of orphans as Dickens' characters, running around in rags and eating gruel. Now, her image changed a bit. She decided to go downstairs to check on her father. He was sitting up in bed, reading.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Honey. What is it?"

"How did you and Mom meet?"

"Didn't I tell you that? Hmm... Well, she was working at the college where I got my first teaching job. Every day I went in to pick up my mail, and there she was, a beautiful face behind the desk. She talked to me first. I

was too nervous around her to say anything. I'm so glad she did."

"Tell me about the little things she did."

"Such as?"

"Well, small details."

"Small details. You know, when you were a baby, she never once went to bed without checking on you. Every night, even if she had gone in the nursery an hour before."

"Yeah?"

"Yep, she really loved you. Of course, she loved your brother and sister too, but there was something about the way she looked at you. Don't tell Ed or Linda."

Carol hugged him and left him to his reading. She went back to the study and locked it up for the night.

Every evening after that one, Carol would take her father his dinner, then go with Sara up to the study. They sat together in the large, leather chair. Carol read short stories to her daughter, and novels to herself. One night, she was reading Huck Finn to Sara, and she thought she heard her mother's voice. It was so soft and only came out for fractions of a second under her own. She put Sara to bed and went back up in the chair. She leaned back and thought about her mother's voice. Then, it came to her

again. She suddenly remembered being warm and happy while her mother read to her. She remembered small pieces of her hair that fell beside her face and moved when she shook her head. She was warm and alive. Carol woke up in the chair, with the same sense of warmth and comfort from several years ago

One night, after she tucked Sara in, she decided to see what was in her mother's desk. She opened it to discover some worn manuscripts. Some of them were finished. Some were half written. All of them had the title and Noelle Adams at the top. Carol had never read her mother's stories. Her mother promised to read them to her when they were finished. She never got to fulfil that promise. After she died, they were locked up with everything else. The stories were mostly fantasies, fairies and kingdoms. Sara's father thought all fairy tales were a waste of time. He went so far as to edit Sara's book collection, giving away every story that seemed too fantastical. He did this while Carol was at work, and when she got home she was furious. But he explained that, rationally, there was nothing her anger would fix now.

"Besides, Carol, you are always talking about having her believe she is strong and independent. Why would you

read her stories where fairy godmothers or princes have to save the poor princess?" To that, Carol had no reply. She hated it when he made references to her viewpoint and made her seem so hypocritical. Carol thought about that incident after the divorce. She was still angry, and could never figure out how to let go.

Carol started reading one of the stories and was caught up in it almost immediately. The scenery was described so beautifully, and the characters were so lively. She loved the way the fairies were rambunctious and mischievous, but never cruel. It reminded her to read A Midsummer Night's Dream again. She decided to read it to Sara, even if she would have to explain each passage to her.

The next night, Sara and Carol began reading A Midsummer Night's Dream together. Sara loved the story; she would sit so quietly on her mother's lap. Carol grew to love these evenings together. Sara seemed so content to sit on her lap, and afterwards they would talk about all manner of things.

After Sara was in bed, Carol would sit in the chair for a few minutes. She loved the comfortable silence that settled over the house when everyone else was asleep. She

took some paper from her desk and prepared to make a list of things not to forget tomorrow. Instead, she wrote "*Once upon a time*". When she discovered her first sentence, she looked at it. She thought about her life in Chicago and her job. She wondered what she would do if she just quit and moved here. Then, she wrote on. "*there lived an old king in an abandoned castle.*" This depressed her and she quit writing.

The next few evenings, Carol read her mother's stories to Sara. They had found the fireplace flue and damper to be in good working order, so they lit a fire and pulled the chair close to it. The fire lit up the center of the room, and left the corners to the lamps while making shadows dance on the books. Carol began to feel that she never wanted to go through another evening without time like this with her daughter.

That night she tried again.

Once upon a time there lived a woman and a little girl. They didn't have much money because the little girl's father died while hunting. They lived in a cottage and the woman sewed capes for the king's soldiers. They were very happy. Then one day, the king's messenger came to the door of

the cabin. He asked for a cape of the highest quality. The woman was told that the king himself would wear the cape and if her cloak was worthy, she would be greatly rewarded. The woman was inspired by such a request, and began work right away. She went to market to get the best fabric. When she brought it home it shone in the sunlight coming through the trees. It was the most beautiful purple color she had ever seen. She began work right away. She sewed and she sewed until the cape began to take shape. She worked late into the night and through days without stopping. One night, she was finished. She lay the cape over a chair and went to bed.

Carol turned in at this point. She didn't know where she was going with this, or why she was writing it at all.

The next day, Carol and Sara worked in the garden together. The beds had been abandoned for years and showed neglect. Carol hesitated to begin such a large task, but Sara began digging, so Carol joined in. After a short time, they uncovered some flowers that were bravely pushing their way to the surface. The flowers were encouraging to Carol and she continued to work while Sara ran around the

yard and did cartwheels. Hours later the beds looked better, and Carol took Sara in to make dinner. She stopped on her way in the house and admired her work. She could almost see her mother smiling over her flowers. After dinner, she continued her story.

The woman didn't realize how tired she had become from working such long hours. She slept for days, and when she finally awoke the cottage was cold and her daughter had gone. She got up in a panic and looked for her. She looked all around the inside of the cabin and in the vegetable garden. She ran around the forest to the stream and the glen, but there was no sign of her daughter. Very frightened now, she ran to town and asked everyone in the streets if they had seen her, but no one had. Someone suggested that the witch might have taken her, but that was too much for the woman to bear. She began to weep. She walked back to the cabin, weeping loudly. When she opened the door there was a fairy inside. The woman was startled. The fairy told her that her daughter had been taken by the queen fairy as a pet. The queen fairy was so pleased by

her that she refused to give her up. The woman became desperate. She begged the fairy to take her instead, but the fairy refused, telling her she was too old and too big to live in fairyland.

When Sara decided to hide in the basement, and Carol couldn't find her all day, Carol decided to clean up the basement. She went through boxes and closets and straightened each room as she progressed. This task took her many days. She kept discovering things that had belonged to her mother and she sat down with each and tried to imagine her mother wearing or using it. The more Carol did this, the more successful she became until every dress and piece of jewelry became associated with a good memory. Carol realized that she couldn't remember the dress her mother was buried in.

Finally, the fairy took pity on the woman and brought her to the fairy kingdom to visit her daughter. As she was headed to the queen's quarters, she saw all the wonderful things the fairies had to offer her daughter. She thought about her own cottage and how neglectful she had been since the king ordered his cloak. When her daughter saw her, she ran into her arms and cried

tears of joy. The woman held her tightly and laughed and cried. This made the fairy queen feel guilty about what she had done, so she offered to let the girl go. She could keep her daughter, the fairy queen told her, if she let her daughter know in three days how important the girl was to her. The woman thanked the fairy queen and left. But that night she lay awake. How could she keep her daughter? She tossed and turned all night. The next morning she gave her daughter her favorite meal and she played with her all day. She had the feeling that the fairy queen was still not pleased. The day after that, she took her daughter to town and bought her a new dress, but she still felt that this was not what the fairy queen wanted. On the third day, the woman was once again in a panic. She paced the floor and watched her daughter until the king's messenger arrived. He asked if she had completed the cloak for the king. Suddenly, the woman knew what to do. She told the messenger that she had not had the time to make the cloak and suggested that he try the tailor in town. Then she called

her daughter to her. "I love you more than anything else in the world. If you do not feel loved by me than nothing else matters." Then she gave her daughter the king's cloak. That moment the cottage was lit with fairy light. The fairy queen appeared, sitting on a chest. She smiled at the woman and her daughter and disappeared. The woman and her daughter looked inside the chest and found all the money they could ever need.

When Carol had finished her story, she rolled it up and tied it with a ribbon. She put a little card on it that read. "To Sara. My first story is for you because I love you as much as my mother loved me."

TEN DOLLARS

As the sun rose over downtown skyscrapers, making them shine golden over the expressway, Elmer strolled along Sumner Boulevard with a slight spring to his step. After a week of rain, he enjoyed the warmth that crept over his shoulders and worn hands.

"Today will be a good day," he muttered to himself, pushing the shopping cart in front of him at a quick pace. None of the others were out yet this morning. Usually it was a waste getting to your corner this early. People on their reluctant way to work just didn't seem to be as charitable as the people out at midday. Early mornings never bothered Elmer before. He always liked to watch the sun rise over breakfast and hop into the car in the crisp, early air. In his old life, that got him into the office earlier than the rest. He rarely thought about the old days anymore, back when he was known as Terry. The crisp morning air that awoke him every morning energized him. He was ready to take on the day's demands as soon as the first morning breeze softly rustled his newspaper blanket.

As he pushed ahead, he noticed the early morning commuters staring at him from behind windshields that sent a glare into Elmer's eyes and made him squint. The cars crept along behind each other like an elephant parade with the bumpers almost attached at back and front. This traffic pattern made for a particularly malevolent clientele.

"Get a job!" one man offered out of the open driver's side window of a Taurus.

"You're wasting our air!" another projected from a Tahoe.

Elmer thought about what he had learned in his ecology classes at the university. He took a deep breath, raising his head and expanding his chest as far as he could. He thought about throwing his arms open for further effect and then decided against it. Larry was killed by a carelessly tossed beer bottle that careened off I-75 and into his cranium. Elmer shrewdly determined not to risk the wrath of the unhappily employed. He put his head down to continue along his way when he saw, partly hidden under a muddy glove, some familiar paper. He bent over to get a closer look; the green print was unmistakable. He pulled it out from under the glove, and held it close to his face. Yes,

yes it was! In his hand, he held he held a ten-dollar bill. "Today will be a great day!" He shouted this now, with more conviction.

He made his way down the boulevard towards the homeless shelter on twenty-second street. When he reached the gray brick building with black lettering, he was greeted by a number of the men, women and children waiting in a long line outside. They all knew him by name, and he greeted them all with a hearty handshake and an easy smile. Loretta was waiting inside for him.

"We have your shower reserved for you, Elmer. Would you like some breakfast after?" It was lovely to live in a city where the homeless were treated so well. In the shelter, they all had warm showers, and a secure spot to leave their belongings, even shopping carts. Loretta always kept a shower open for Elmer in the mornings.

"I sure would, Loretta. Thank you."

Elmer left his cart in one of the belonging areas by the door and entered the shower room. The large, open area, with naked men walking around benches leaving large piles of coats, hats, shirts and pants on them reminded him of junior high sport locker rooms, without the lockers. Elmer showered and used a cracked mirror in the room to

shave. Then he dressed in the clothes Salvation Army brought by yesterday and had breakfast.

After breakfast, he took his cart and continued on his way. Ten minutes later he strolled into the Volunteer Tutoring Center and surveyed the room. Jenna greeted him with a smile.

"I'm so glad you are here again, Elmer. We are really lucky to have you as our Math tutor." Elmer smiled and walked by a long line of students to his desk.

Jimmy didn't understand how to set up the equation.

"If you only need these numbers, how come they put all that other stuff in there?"

"That's the trick. See, you have to dissect the question, then figure out what parts you need and what parts are trash."

"What?"

"Here, I'll show you. If boat A with 2 people is traveling at 40 knots, and boat B with 4 people is traveling at 35 knots and they are both crossing the long part of a 40 by 20 kilometer at what point will they meet provided they leave the opposite ends of the lake and head toward each other on a straight path? What numbers do you

need to set up a rate/distance/time equation? What do you have and what do you need?"

"Well, you have rates, the knots at which both boats are traveling and the distance, the length of the lake, so you need the time."

"Right, the number of passengers and the width of the lake don't matter."

After thirty minutes of this, Jimmy could envision the equations in his mind. It was almost time for class, so he thanked Elmer and met Ethan at the door.

"Wait, Jimmy, can I get some change from you?" Elmer was right behind Jimmy with something in his hand.

"What?"

"I found this, do you have a couple of fives for it?"

"Sure, Elmer. Mom gave me two fives for lunch and supplies today."

"Thanks, Jim." Elmer handed him the ten-dollar bill and Jimmy and his friend Ethan left the building and unlocked their bikes. There were no bike lanes on thirty-second street, so they pushed their bikes down the sidewalk, slowly and carefully, trying not to get in anyone's way.

"Damn kids! Get off the sidewalk." Dorothy, who felt that the boys took up too much space on the sidewalk and should just ride in the street, accosted Jimmy and Ethan. She reached in her satchel with the crocheted front and pulled out a bottle of Tums, which she lobbed at the boys, barely missing Ethan's head as he ducked. As she did this, her wallet dropped out of her bag. She didn't notice, and kept going along her way.

"Come on, let's get out of here."

"Wait a minute, Ethan." Jimmy picked up the wallet.

"Why do you wanna do something nice for such a rotten old lady, Jimmy?" Then Ethan thought about it. "Here, give it to me." Jimmy handed him the wallet and Ethan opened it. Inside were a twenty-dollar bill and some cards. Ethan took the twenty.

"What are you doing?"

"Finder's fee." Before Jimmy could say anything, Ethan chased the old lady, holding her wallet up.

"Here, lady, you dropped this." Jimmy followed Ethan towards the old woman and when neither Ethan nor the old lady were looking, slipped the ten-dollar bill into her bag.

"Well, look who's honest," said the woman. "Maybe you're not so bad after all."

Dorothy watched the boys jog away, pushing their bikes awkwardly next to them. She realized her bag was still open and quickly snapped it shut, clasping it to her tightly and looking for any suspicious characters who may have made their way into its contents while she had been distracted by boys and their bicycles. Seeing no one close to her, and actually observing some people giving her a little extra sidewalk space, she was satisfied and continued on her way.

As she walked along, she looked around her, careful not to expose herself to any thieves and cutthroats who would take a bag from a sweet old lady as easily as they would hit their mothers. The woman all wore those new skirts that showed lots of leg. These slutty skirts were often coupled with a man's jacket and short hair. Now how could that be attractive? They were probably all lesbians, Dorothy thought, spitting out her gum right where one would stand to mail letters at a post office box.

Dorothy reached the theatre promptly at nine o'clock. She was always prompt; *maybe that's what she would have her worthless bum son engrave on her stone.* Stepping backstage, she missed a light cord and tripped. As she

caught herself on the velvet curtain, she mumbled about how it was a wonder the stagehands got anything done right at all. "Jesus, if you want something right nowadays you have to do it yourself." After that setback, she was more careful navigating to the dressing rooms where she changed clothes, applied makeup and prepared to play the starring role in the starving actor's production of Hello Dolly.

Dorothy remembered that her makeup was in her bag and emptied it on the dressing table. The ten-dollar bill slipped out and fell to the floor behind her, where Sherry was trying to get past her without being noticed. *If I can just get past the old bat, my day might not be so bad.* Sherry thought. She glanced down and something caught her eye. She bent over and picked up the ten-dollar bill. *This is a sign.* She thought. *I am leaving and it is the right thing to do. My luck is gonna change.* She smiled and skipped out into the street, ignoring the mutterings of Dorothy that stopped at the close of the theatre door.

She arrived home to the empty apartment she had begun to hate over the past few years. Frank was at work and had left her with a sink full of dishes from his dinner last night and a note to buy sour cream at the grocery store. She sighed and applied some Palmolive to a sponge.

As she washed the first plate, a feeling overtook her that she had never felt before. She felt a swell in her blood pressure as her heart rate increased and she dropped the plate in the sink. If she got a sign that was positive about leaving the theatre, then maybe leaving everything behind is the right idea as well. She left the kitchen in a trance and headed toward the bathroom where the pink door hung slightly open, weighted down by layers of clothing hung on the hooks and over the top. Brushing past the door, she went up to the mirror, opened it, and pushed all of her cosmetics out and into the sink. She applied the makeup with a heavy hand. A cloud of hairspray filled the room as she styled her hair with a flair she never had before. She finished the look with a feather boa. Sherri looked at the reflection of a woman who looked a little like she did after last Valentine's day at Glamour Shots. She left the bathroom, pulled the extra cash out of the Frank's sock drawer in the bedroom and left the house, neglecting to even close the door behind her. She walked a little ways out into the street and stopped. "Oh," she said out loud. She turned back quickly and ran in the door, rushing past the living area into the kitchen. Her lucky ten-dollar bill was sitting on the counter next to the pile

of dirty dishes. She picked it up, shoved it in her pocket and left the house. As she walked down the sidewalk with a new confident air, she brushed past a man in a business suit. "Excuse me," she breathed into his ear with a Marilyn Monroe voice she never knew she had. Unfortunately for Sherry, her luck was about to change again. The ten-dollar bill she had tucked in her pocket was wet and stuck to her suit so that it was only half way outside her pocket. When she brushed against the man, the ten stuck to him for a moment, then fell to the ground.

A gust of wind came in and blew the bill down the sidewalk. It tumbled and turned with the breeze, meandering along the sidewalk, then into some freshly cut grass and against a tree next to where two small boys were playing. "Look, Harry. Look at this!" One boy ran up to the bill and grabbed it. He held it tightly in his right hand, and hopped around the tree, whooping.

"What? What is it?"

"It's a ten dollar bill, and it's all mine."

"But this is my lawn!"

"So? I saw it and now it's mine."

"It should be half mine. It's on my property."

"That doesn't matter, dope." At this insult, one boy threw himself at the other boy and they began a tussle, one trying to grab the bill, while the other one was trying to defend it. They rolled and scuffled until they rolled right out into the street in front of a car. The car stopped short, and the boys, startled, stopped their fight. The driver of the car got out.

"Are you boys okay? You shouldn't be in the street! Don't you know you could've gotten killed!"

The boys stared wide-eyed at the driver, the argument and the initiator now forgotten. The ten-dollar bill blew down the road. It skipped a little as it moved slowly towards a busier street. It blew into a small puddle and stuck there. A large limousine rolled up next to the puddle and a wealthy man got out. The man had successfully forgotten the time before he became rich in the stock market. He forgot about all things he said about his nasty superiors and became a nasty superior himself. He stepped right on the ten-dollar bill and became angry that he now had a little water on his shoe. He wiped his shoe vigorously on the doormat, dislodging the bill that had stuck to the sole and walked into the building.

The doorman didn't miss the bill. He bent over and picked it up as soon as the wealthy man was out of sight. He stuck it in his coat pocket and continued to open the door for the people who went inside, thinking about how he hadn't talked to his wife in a while. On his lunch break, the doorman went to a shop on the corner and there purchased, with the ten-dollar bill, a rose in a small vase for his wife. The man behind the counter took the ten-dollar bill and placed it among its comrades in the cash drawer. There the bill lay until a woman purchased a pregnancy test with a twenty and received it for change. She went straight back to the office and into the office bathroom. There, she ran the test and found out. The woman took the afternoon off that day and went to another store, where she bought a teddy bear with the ten and it again lay with like bills in the cash drawer.

Because the store was a small one, the owner didn't gather the day's proceeds; instead, he waited until a week was up and did the books and his bank trip on Friday. This day was Thursday. That night, a man came in the store in an unusual way. He kicked in the alley door and went to the cash register. The thief tore the register off the counter and emptied it into his bag. Then he closed the

bag and left. He ran with the ill-begotten loot down a few alleys and into his living assisted residence, where his activities director was waiting for him at the door.

"Hello, Bert."

"Oh, hello, Ethel."

"What do you have there?"

"Oh, just a little bit I needed."

"For what, Bert? We take care of you here. Your son pays all the bills. There is no money problem. Why do you keep stealing? This is the second time I've caught you, and I will report you next time, Bert."

"Sorry, Ethel." Bert hung his head. He didn't know why he had to steal things, he just did it. He didn't want to disappoint Ethel, who had been so good to him these past years.

"Where did you take this from?"

"The shop on the corner of Elm and seventh."

"Hand it over, Bert. I'm taking it back."

Bert reluctantly handed Ethel the bag and headed straight for his room.

Ethel returned to the shop. It was still quiet and dark, so she went in the door and tiptoed behind the counter. She hid the bag in one of the cabinets under the

counter. She did not notice that the bag had a tear in it and a few bills escaped out the bottom. The ten fell out and was caught by the wind again. It flew into a playground and rested next to a large, painted metal rooster on a spring. There it spent the night, getting covered in sand by the breeze.

The next morning was a sunny one. Many children came to play in the park, including one toddler and her nanny. The toddler liked to dig in the sand and find things. That day, she found a wonderful piece of paper. It fit perfectly into her small hands. It was not a pretty color, mostly green and black, but it made a delightful sound when it ripped. The toddler continued to rip it apart then went over to the sandbox to see if she could find something better to play with.

MRS. CLEOME'S WONDEROUS SOIL

For many years, the neighborhood looked forward to spring and summer in the garden of Mrs. Cleome. For as long as she had lived in the large Victorian on the corner of Cherry and Bridal streets, she had tended the grounds and garden herself. The result of her toil was quite breathtaking and wonderful. From the earliest Snow Crocus to the last Chinese Lantern, every month between March and October was blessed with a new blooming season in Mrs. Cleome's landscape.

Everyone came around to view this glorious beauty, whether it was the lucky few who were invited to her garden tea parties and evening meditations, the neighborhood volunteers who performed the upkeep on the colorful paint on house and trim every five years, the graduate student she allowed to study in the undisturbed quiet of the back garden, or the envious ladies who walked their dogs past while pretending not to gorge their eyes with the climbing roses that grew up and over trellises and arbors in a manner that seemed perfectly careless, and the lawn of

tulips and later grass so soft that to walk with bare feet through it would be a luxury.

The summer tea parties were a delight to all the senses. The guests sat on cushions on iron chairs around an iron table filled with treats made fresh from the oven and garden, including the sweet rose hip tea. They sipped their tea and feasted their eyes on beds of Day Lilies and Geraniums growing in front of tall Hollyhocks and healthy Lupine. The scent of the Jasmine hanging plants wafted through the air as they sipped their tea, listening to quiet conversation and the gentle trickle of water into a pond filled with water lilies and goldfish.

Attached to the back of the house and overflowing with plant life was a carefully attended greenhouse. In it, Mrs. Cleome had Cala Lillies, and mango trees, pineapple bushes and banana trees that bore fruit from late spring to early fall. There also grew the secret ingredients for her tea; sure to cure any sore throat and sooth the most savage of moods. Mrs. Cleome sold it in small, neatly wrapped packages to her neighbors and friends.

Her house and garden had been featured in no less than five home and garden magazines, regional and national. It was not unusual for her to have visitors from botanical

gardens and horticulture institutes to take cuttings of her orchids, grapevines and peonies. She was always polite to the journalists that visited her home to peer around and take photos. She invited the young ones to stay for dinner. And they were all sent on their way with a package of her wonderful tea. But she never, not even once, gave the slightest hint to the special gardening techniques she employed. When asked how it was that she had never replaced the compost or grew cover crops in winter, yet her soil remained moist, fertile and well drained throughout, she would smile demurely, looking down in a shy manner and suggest her luck or a heredity green thumb.

For the most part, the neighbors were appreciative of Mrs. Cleome's efforts. If they were lucky enough to live close, pieces of her garden would spread themselves into their property. The Karathes were pleased to have roses growing over the stone wall that separated their property from Mrs. Cleome's. The Martin's were pleased to have the Clematis that began in her back yard, climb up and flower over their covered back porch. Everyone on the street benefited from the lady bugs and preying mantis that bred like wildfire in Mrs. Cleome's tomato plants. The neighborhood had been lucky enough to see their property

values grow over the years, and some attributed this to Mrs. Cleome's artful landscaping.

There were dissidents however.

The Miss Andersons lived together at the end of Bridal Lane and were not pleased that they couldn't seem to grow the herb symphonies of Cleome fame. They had not made the acquaintance of Mrs. Cleome, in part because they had never taken the time to knock on her door and offer a homemade dish, or stop by for a visit while walking the dogs. They always felt that, since she had moved into the neighborhood at a later time than they had, she should be the one to make the first advances. However, Mrs. Cleome never ventured far from her own house. She complained of weakness and dizziness if she should walk too far; therefore, most people came to her. Mr. Cleome had passed away just after the move to the neighborhood. He was the social instigator of the couple. They also had a son, who some say had gone to University some times ago, but no one had heard spoken of in some time. After years of not being invited to the summer tea parties that were the talk of the neighborhood association's meetings, the Miss Andersons became so displeased with Mrs. Cleome, that they conspired never to go to her house, even if invited.

One afternoon in June, when the roses were still going strong and scented the air with their heavy perfume, the Miss Andersons were walking by Mrs. Cleome's Victorian.

"I wonder why our roses never last through June."
Claire Anderson said to her sister.

"Oh dear, why should you want them around that long anyway, they only drop all their petals on the surrounding ground and leave a mess."

"Well, I suppose that's true. But wouldn't it be nice to have cherries this early?"

"I'll not have you wistfully longing to have our tidy lawn as overgrown as that house. Now stop it." Margaret gave her sister a stern look as the ladies past the house and continued along the street. There seemed to be a weighted silence between the sisters for the rest of the block until the Victorian was out of sight.

"Well, would you like some cookies, Margaret," Claire asked. "We could bake some when we get home."

"Yes. I think that would be a wonderful way to end the day," Margaret replied. Then she quickened her step and they reached their house quickly in anticipation of the sweet taste that lay ahead.

The afternoon had not yet passed completely, when Claire found herself thinking again about the roses in Mrs. Cleome's yard. She gazed out the back window and tried to imagine Daffodils that grew as prolifically as the ones along Mrs. Cleome's front walk, edging the neatly cut grass

That night, as the women prepared to turn in, Claire knocked on her sister's door.

"Come in, Claire." She entered her sister's room as softly as one who was late for service would enter a church and stood behind Margaret's chair for a short time, eyeing her in the mirror and arranging her next words carefully.

"Wouldn't you like to find out, at the very least, wouldn't you like to know how she grows her grass so nicely?"

"Who, dear?"

"Mrs. Cleome."

"Oh, why do you continue to carry on about her and her weeds?"

"Don't get cross with me, Margaret," replied Claire. "It's just that, well, her garden is lovely." Margaret sighed. She shook her head and put down her hairbrush.

"Yes, Claire, I must admit, it has its charms. I can only imagine she works night and day to keep that place as

it is. Now, would you want to concentrate all our efforts on something that is so transitory as a garden?"

"Well, Margaret, I just thought that, if we knew what fertilizer she used or how often she watered, we could at least grow some bulbs. They are so easy to maintain, and they come back every year."

Margaret looked in her sister's pleading eyes. They were blue; the same light color as their mother's and thinking of her mother made Margaret a little sad.

"All, right, Claire. Do you want to go and just ask her."

"No, that wouldn't work. We don't even know her, and I hear she won't tell anyone how she does it. We shall have to spy on her."

"I won't hear of it, Claire. How preposterous!"

"Not all the time, Maggie, just while she is gardening. I shouldn't think it would be indecent if we just noted when she watered."

"Claire, if you insist on such indecorous methods, I must insist you do it yourself. If you get caught, I don't know you."

"Oh Maggie, you are so proper."

The next day, Claire walked slowly past Mrs. Cleome's house. She looked over the walls carefully and noticed that every window was covered up. Her only hope would be to walk by when she was working outside. But that wouldn't do, because no one ever saw Mrs. Cleome performing any task that Claire hadn't tried herself to do in her own garden. The sun was beginning to set over the house and multitudes of flowers in the yard, so Claire headed home frustrated.

At dinner, she told Margaret about the house.

"Well, she must value her privacy, and no wonder, with snoops like you lurking about!"

"Please, Maggie! The more I think about it, the more it vexes me. I must know."

"Well, what about asking Mr. Gemstone."

"Who."

"You remember, he used to call on me years ago."

"Oh yes, of course. Mr. Gemstone. Why?"

"Because he is the head of the horticulture department at the university. He can probably give you some suggestions."

"Perhaps we can send him to gather a sample of her dirt. He might be able to tell us if there is anything unusual in it."

"Well, Claire, I don't suppose it would hurt to ask, although I doubt her secret ways are unknown to him."

The next week the sisters arranged for a coach to the university where they found Mr. Gemstone at work in his office.

He was a small man with a very polished appearance except for the dirt under his fingernails. He wore a crisp, freshly pressed suit and had his hair combed back, every piece in place. He smiled broadly at Margaret when they entered. Claire noticed a nice row of white, straight teeth.

"Maggie. It's been far too long!"

"George, how have you been? You remember my sister Claire?" The two of them talked about the present, past and caught up until Claire lost patience.

"Excuse me, Mr. Gemstone. I wonder if we may ask you a great favor." Margaret seemed to snap back into the room and gave her sister an ugly look.

"Well, George, it's really more to satisfy a curiosity, and perhaps you may enjoy a little research project of your own."

"Maggie, I would do anything for you, my dear. What can I do for you?"

The ladies explained the situation to Mr. Gemstone who seemed receptive to the plan.

On the way back, Claire turned towards her sister.

"Did you notice what a wonderful jade ring he had on his finger? He must have money. Why is it that he stopped calling on you, Maggie? He seems to adore you?"

"I asked him to, Claire?"

"Why ever would you do that?"

"He had dirty fingernails, Claire. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life with a man who would caress me with his constantly dirty nails."

That night, Mr. Gemstone thought about what he had been told. He imagined the sights and smells of the wondrous garden all night. The very next morning he hastily cancelled classes for the day and set off for Mrs. Cleome's house. When he arrived, he was awestruck. What a sight to behold! It was better to see the Zinnia's as large as dinner plates with his own eyes than to gaze at them from a periodical. He went up to the door and knocked with the lion's head knocker. A distinguished looking woman answered the door.

"I'm looking for Mrs. Cleome. Are you she?"

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"My name is Mr. Gemstone. I teach Horticulture at the university. I heard about your beautiful garden and I wondered whether I might have a look around?"

"Certainly, Mr. Gemstone. I am rather tired today, however. Might you make yourself at home and have a look around by yourself?"

Mr. Gemstone began in the greenhouse. He admired the flowering tropicals and fingered the leaves of the orchids. He noticed the soil was very rich, moist and dark. It crumbled apart easily between his fingers. This was the soil of the Garden of Eden he thought, sifting it through his hands. How does she get it so rich? It was what was known in the Horticulture world as black gold, but this was finer than any he had seen before. He thought he heard a noise behind him and turned to see Mrs. Cleome observing him.

"Oh," she uttered, pretending to be startled. "Are you finding what you like?"

"Yes, thank you, Mrs. Cleome. Tell me, do you add mushroom compost to your dirt?"

"Yes, and some other things too."

"I have to tell you, Mrs. Cleome, that this is the most wonderful soil I have ever seen. I must have a sample of it to analyze at the lab!"

"Oh, must you?"

"Oh yes, you may have discovered something amazing here."

"Well, I don't suppose, I really..."

"Mrs. Cleome, enough is enough. I can understand your not wanting to share your secret, but imagine the benefit this soil could do! Farmers could grow crops to feed people ten times the amount they do now, and not have to let the field lay in fodder. Do you understand, Mrs. Cleome?"

A curious expression passed ever so briefly over Mrs. Cleome's face before she answered. "Well, I suppose I could tell you. But you must never leave my home without sampling some of my wonderful tea! It's something I do on the side."

At his acceptance of her offer of tea, Mrs. Cleome turned and headed back towards the kitchen. Now, Mr. Gemstone began to gather some of this wonderful soil in a small vial he had taken with him with such a task in mind. He was so fixated on the blackness of the soil he barely heard Mrs. Cleome call him to have some tea.

While they sipped the rose hip tea, Mr. Gemstone could talk of nothing else but the wonders the soil could do for agriculture. Even as he talked about the benefits to mankind, he imagined the prize money and awards that would befall him when he presented this soil to the Horticulture committees around the globe.

"Mrs. Cleome, I can't help but notice how sweet your tea tastes. It's wonderful! I do have quite a sweet tooth!"

"Thank you, Mr. Gemstone! I must admit I have a bit of a heavy hand with the honey."

The Miss Anderson's had not heard from Mr. Gemstone in a week. They had placed calls to his office and had not received a word back. One night, the moon shone so brightly and was so full that the Miss Andersons decided to take a moonlight walk. They went around the neighborhood and their path took them meandering here and there until they stopped in front of Mrs. Cleome's house. There they noticed a curious thing. All the lights in the house were out, save those in the basement. They noticed that they could see a silhouette through the window coverings and watched. The figured seemed to be that of Mrs. Cleome, but

they had heard that she was small and weak. This silhouette appeared to be striking something with an ax. They gave each other a wide-eyed look and headed home in a bit of a hurry.

Once they were close to home, they slowed and Claire turned to her sister.

"Do you suppose she was chopping up her secret root for the tea she sells?"

"Maybe she hires someone else to do it for her."

"I wonder if she keeps him in her confidence?"

The next day, they decided to make themselves known to the curious Mrs. Cleome. They would just go down, and introduce themselves. As they were walking out the door, Claire ran back in the house, saying she had forgotten something. She came out again with a cup that she placed in her purse. Without a word to her sister, she closed the door and they started off down the street.

As they approached the house, Maggie couldn't hide a small shudder that grasped her slight frame. Claire smiled at her and gave her a hand up the steps. When Mrs. Cleome answered the door, she seemed small and weak. She knew them right away and invited them inside. They all walked around the main floor, and when Claire begged to see the

greenhouse she had heard so much about, they went right to it. After the grand tour, they headed into the garden, where Claire turned to Mrs. Cleome.

"Oh, Mrs. Cleome..."

"My dear, call me Melinda."

"Melinda, I seem to have caught a slight sniffle, would you be so kind as to fetch me a handkerchief."

Mrs. Cleome said of course she would and went to go get it. Claire reached into her bag and pulled out the cup she had brought. She bent over quick as a whip and scooped some dirt into it. Then she put it back in her bag and winked at her sister.

"If Mr. Gemstone is to be so long at satisfying our curiosity, would it hurt to borrow a little dirt to start some seeds in?"

The sisters left with smiles and promises to visit more often and walked home in a hurry, eager to experiment with their stolen magic. Claire had some Marigold seeds she had been keeping for some time, and she practically skipped home to get them started. At her potting table, Claire noticed a large lump in the soil. *Ah-ha*, she thought, *this must be the very thing!* She brushed the dirt off it, then gasped and dropped it into the shallow container for

planting seeds. To her horror, there, lying in the bottom of the container pointing at her in an accusatory manner was a man's finger with the very jade ring she had been admiring last week still wrapped around the bottom.

WE SHOULDN'T HAVE COME HERE

"We shouldn't have come here." The woman sat wearily on the suitcases and watched the young girl run around the pole in the middle of gate C32. The girl still had chocolate on her face from the ice cream.

"No, it's all right. We'll get out of here okay." The man checked his watch and then looked again at the little girl, who had stopped running around the pole and began spinning with her arms open.

"We shouldn't have come. What can we do now?"

"Well, we could get on another plane."

"The last one home is already gone."

"We could use the tickets to get on another one."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know. Nowhere I guess."

"Where would you go if you could go anywhere?" The woman turned her head to look directly at her husband. He leaned back.

"I don't know. Europe, maybe."

"Do you want to go next summer?"

"With Sally?"

"Yeah, or she could stay with my parents."

"I don't want to think about traveling anywhere else with her right now."

The girl fell over and started to cry. The woman looked at the man again. He sighed heavily, looked around the gate and looked back at her. The woman got up and went over to the girl. She picked the girl up and held her against her chest until she stopped crying.

"It was your idea to take this trip."

The woman looked at the man sharply. She held him in her gaze.

"We needed to take it. That's not the point now, is it?" She said. "It doesn't change where we are."

"Do you want to go to change where we are? Let's go to the bar. I still have some cash."

"It's better than sitting here. Do you have enough for Sally to eat something."

"I think so."

They picked up the bags and headed towards the airport bar. The bar was nearly empty. They put the suitcases in the booth and got in on different sides. Sally sat next to her mother.

"What do you want? I think we have to order at the bar."

"Something on tap, and an appetizer for Sally."

"Nachos." Sally said.

"Okay, Silly Sal, I'll see if they have some." He looked at his wife. She was digging through a small bag. He went to the bar.

"Sally, here are some crayons." The woman said, pulling them and a coloring book out of her bag. "Do you want to color?"

"Yes!" Sally took them and began coloring a picture of a duck. The woman kissed the top of her head.

The man walked back to the booth with a plate of nachos, and two beers. Then, he went back to the bar to get a glass of milk that was waiting there for him.

"I want to get on the earliest flight and eat breakfast at home." He said. He sipped his beer.

The woman nodded in reply and sipped her beer.

"I want to have eggs and sausage and hot sauce in a tortilla."

"Whatever." The mother said as she watched another woman enter the bar and sit by herself. The other woman wore a suit and carried a briefcase.

"Do you think I should go back to work?"

"Do you want to?"

"Not really."

"Then don't."

"But sometimes I feel like the days are going by too fast. I have lost my concept of time." The woman looked through the man as she said this, as if Chronos were behind him with his ever-present hourglass.

"Then go to work." The man replied.

"You make everything seem so obvious."

"Well, it is."

"What about Sally?"

"Daycare."

"I couldn't do that. I would miss her."

"Then stay home."

"I'm tired of the same thing. I think I will try to find a mother's group."

The man put down his beer and sighed. "I want you to work, but if you don't get a job that's more than thirty thousand a year, it's not worth it with day care."

"I don't want to do that. I want to go back to school."

"It's too late for that now. Why don't you apply for a job at my company? We don't have to work in the same department."

"I'll never get around to applying. I have too many household things to take care of."

"That's your job." The man said this as if he had just defined the woman's life for her.

"I know. I should think about it on a timed schedule, give myself breaks and stuff like that."

"You would have more time if you got up earlier."

"I like sleeping late, besides Sally still doesn't wake up till eight."

"You should get up and make me breakfast every morning. Then you could get cleaning done before Sally wakes up."

The woman looked at the man's shirt. It had a small stain on the left breast pocket.

"We'll be here in the morning. We're never getting home."

"We'll be home tomorrow. Then you can start your new schedule." The man smiled as he said this.

Sally finished her nachos and began coloring again. After a little bit of this, she became bored and began

dropping the crayons on the floor. She got down to pick them up, then dropped them again.

"Are we sleeping at the gate?" The woman asked the man.

"Unless you have a better idea."

"I was just wondering. You know, I think I want everything."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I want it all. I want a rewarding career. I want to take care of Sally at home. I want a nice house. I know what I want, it seems so easy to do things once you know what you want."

"You have to chose what you want and stick to that choice. Let's find a spot to get comfy in at the gate, shall we?"

The woman picked up all the girl's things, while the man pulled the bags out of the bar. They walked back to the gate together in silence.

THE NEW ARRIVAL

You've spent weeks at computer retailers talking to the salespeople, who are all men you could swear recently had their voices descend from alto to tenor range, and toying with machines on display. Computer magazines and catalogs clutter your coffee tables at home, the backseat of your 93 Jetta, and your desk in the obscure dark corner of the office. Magazine ads for technical wonders no longer have to leap off the page in full color to catch your attention, and you realize you have developed a new working vocabulary. RAM is not a misspelling of rapid eye movement, and MHz refers to speed, not sound. You can stroll into your local retailer, confident that you no longer appear befuddled, and are ready to bat when the eager, yet angst-ridden, Jedi sales force throws a technical pitch at you. You have finally become aware of the fact that the latest technology you purchased two years ago no longer fulfils your requirements. Acceptance is a short step away. You are ready to purchase a new computer.

You return to the store, where two months ago you stood in front of the aisle of monitors, CPU's, mice and

keyboards, bewitched by the information cards with signs and symbols you did not fully comprehend at the time. At that time, you had regurgitated key phrases you remember hearing the office technical assistant mention in a vain attempt to save face. Now, you confidently approach Stan, the pimped, bespectacled computer brute who so aptly confused you earlier, and you describe the system specifications you require. You emerge from the store thirty minutes later, triumphant.

At home, you set aside time to set up your new computer. You glance through the manual only to discover more technical jargon. So, you set about plugging things in where you believe they go. After a few hours of trial and error, your system is set up, and you turn it on. You are immediately impressed with the speed of the new computer. Your new system has a Pentium 200MHz processor with a brand name chip and new technology to make that chip bypass commands and operate faster. Your new system has 64 MB of RAM, which should save you from the dreaded General Protection Faults that ate data while you staggered to the phone in a last ditch, desperate attempt to attain technical support. Your new system has a multimedia

package with a CD player, speakers with a sub-woofer, and a microphone. Your new system can be used as an answering machine, a speaker phone, a stereo, a VCR, a fax machine, and might be able to brew coffee if you can just get the specs right. Your new system can get you onto the Internet in minutes, and download anything you desire faster than you can say "dirty pictures". Your new system has four different input devices and a huge monitor. You watch as programs fly on and off the screen, making changes in the blink of an eye. Your new system rocks!

You sit in front of the new machine, a commitment of two months salary that you hope won't be obsolete as quickly as your marriage was, and you wonder why the hell it was you had bought the thing.

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